**“My Kinsman, Major Molineux”**

**By Nathanial Hawthorne**

**Study Guide adapted by Suzanne Conti**

**From** http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides6/Kinsman.html

**Type of Work and Year of Publication**

.......“My Kinsman, Major Molineux” is a short story set in colonial America. Its genre is romanticism with Gothic overtones. Gray & Bowen published the story in 1832 in *The Token*, a Boston literary annual bound as a book for Christmas gift-giving. The story later appeared in *The Snow-Image, and Other Twice-Told Tales*, a collection published in Boston in 1852 by Ticknor, Reed & Fields.

**Setting and Historical Background**

.......The action takes place on a moonlit evening in Boston, circa 1730, when the

city was part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. At that time, anti-British sentiment was prevalent in the colony. The ill will began to take root in 1686, when Britain appointed the first governor of the colony, Sir Edmund Andros. Prior to that time (between 1630 and 1686), the colonists had ruled themselves with little British interference. After 1686, resentment of British rule manifested itself in hostility against anyone who represented or supported British rule. In Hawthorne's story, Major Molineux is such a person.

.......Hawthorne wrote the following introduction to the story to provide historical

background that helps explain the hostility toward Molineux:

After the kings of Great Britain had assumed the right of appointing

the colonial governors, the measures of the latter seldom met with the

ready and generous approbation which had been paid to those of their

predecessors, under the original charters. The people looked with

most jealous scrutiny to the exercise of power which did not emanate

from themselves, and they usually rewarded their rulers with slender gratitude for the compliances by which, in softening their instructions from beyond the sea, they had incurred the reprehension of those who gave them. The annals of Massachusetts Bay will inform us, that of six governors in the space

of about forty years from the surrender of the old charter, under James II, two were imprisoned by a popular insurrection; a third, as Hutchinson\* inclines to believe, was driven from the province by the whizzing of a musket-ball; a fourth, in the opinion of the same historian, was hastened to his grave by continual bickerings with the House of Representatives; and the remaining two, as well as their successors, till the Revolution, were favored with few and brief

intervals of peaceful sway. The inferior members of the court party, in

times of high political excitement, led scarcely a more desirable life.

These remarks may serve as a preface to the following adventures,

which chanced upon a summer night, not far from a hundred years

ago. The reader, in order to avoid a long and dry detail of colonial

affairs, is requested to dispense with an account of the train of

circumstances that had caused much temporary inflammation of the

popular mind.

\*Hutchinson: Thomas Hutchinson (1711-1780), the last governor of the

Massachusetts Bay Colony. He wrote a history of the colony.

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**Characters**

**Robin**: Country lad of nearly eighteen who travels to Boston to find his relative,

Major Molineux, a wealthy city resident who had promised to use his money and

influence to help the youth make an auspicious start in the world. When Robin

arrives just before 9 o'clock, he is unaware that the Bostonians plan to tar and

feather Molineux because of an offense he committed in connection with his loyalty to Britain. Many citizens rebuff and laugh at Robin when he asks them for directions to the home of "my kinsman, Major Molineux."

**Major Molineux**: Robin's would-be benefactor, whom townsmen tar and feather.

**Elderly Man With a Cane**: Pedestrian Robin meets upon his arrival in Boston. When Robin asks him where he can find Major Molineux, the old man says he does not know the major, angrily upbraids the youth for interrupting his walk, and threatens to have him placed in stocks.

**Barbers**: Bostonians who witness Robin's encounter with the elderly man. As

Robin walks off, the barbers laugh at him.

**Tavern Patrons**: These include seamen, craftsmen, countrymen, and a sinisterlooking man with a prominent forehead, bushy eyebrows, and fiery eyes. This man, who appears later in the story with a face painted red on one side and black on the other, is among the ringleaders planning the tarring and feathering.

**French Protestant**: Bartender and innkeeper at the tavern. He is a small man

who greets Robin politely. After Robin mentions that he is looking for Major

Molineux, the innkeeper becomes hostile and Robin leaves. The laughter of the

tavern patrons trails after him.

**Woman in Scarlet Petticoat**: Young woman who attempts to seduce Robin.

**Watchman With Lantern**: He encounters Robin on the street and orders him to go home.

**Groups in Strange Attire**: Two groups of people Robin encounters separately. They address him in a strange language. When he does not respond, they curse him.

**Gentleman**: Man who treats Robin kindly and waits with him on a street corner

while townspeople haul Major Molineux, tarred and feathered, through the streets in a cart.

**Various Townspeople**

**Robin's Family**: They include Robin's father, a clergyman and farmer; his mother; and a brother, sister, and small child. They play no active role in the story.

**Ferryman**: Boatman who takes Robin across the river to Boston.

**Plot Summary**

.......As the hour approaches 9 p.m., a country lad of nearly eighteen arrives at

Boston on a ferryboat and heads into town looking for the dwelling of his kinsman, Major Molineux. The youth, called Robin, is wearing a gray coat, leather breeches, and a tricorn hat. He carries an oak cudgel, and a sack hangs from a shoulder. Nature has endowed him with handsome features. Spying an old man attired in a periwig, a dark coat, and silk stockings who has been tapping along with a polished cane, Robin tugs at his coat, bids him good evening, and asks where he might find Molineux.

.......“Let go my garment, fellow” (paragraph 6), the old man commands.

.......He then upbraids the youth for his forwardness and threatens to have him

clapped in stocks. Robin lets go and hurries off, followed by laughter from men at a nearby barbershop who had witnessed the encounter.

.......Robin enters the center of town, where shops are closed and the streets are

empty. By and by, he happens upon an inn from which lively conversation emanates through an open window. He goes in to ask directions to Molineux's house. Most of the patrons are seamen seated on benches and chairs drinking punch. Others are craftsmen. In a quiet corner, country folk are eating bread and bacon. Near the door is a man with a prominent forehead, large nose, shaggy eyebrows, and fiery eyes. The innkeeper comes over and welcomes Robin, expressing the hope that he will take lodging at the inn. The eyes of the patrons then fix on the youth, who says he cannot stay because he has only a three-pence note in his pocket. He wishes only to learn the way to the house of his kinsman, Major Molineux. The innkeeper then turns and reads from a paper on the wall that describes an escaped indentured servant and offers a reward for his capture. When the innkeeper claims that the escapee's description fits Robin's, the youth gets ready to wield his club. But he refrains from doing so when he notices the hostility in the eyes of the patrons. The man with the prominent forehead is sneering. When Robin leaves, laughter again follows him.

.......After turning into “a street of mean appearance” (paragraph 24) that runs down to the harbor, he sees a woman's scarlet petticoat through the crack of a door left ajar at one of the houses, a small dwelling of two stories. Without seeing her face, Robin calls out to her: “My sweet pretty mistress, will you be kind enough to tell me whereabouts I must seek the dwelling of my kinsman, Major Molineux?” (paragraph 27).

.......His polite manner and good looks attract her outside. She is a pretty little thing with eyes reflecting “a sly freedom” (paragraph 28), the narrator says. When she tells Robin that Molineux lives within, he doubts that the major would live on a street of such common appearance and in so small a house. Consequently, he asks only that the major be called to the door so that he can give him a message from the country. But the young lady tells him the major is already in bed, having drunk a strong brew before retiring. However, saying it would be inhospitable of her to turn away a kinsman of the major, she invites him in. Taking him by the hand, she draws him toward the threshold. But when a door at a nearby house opens, she lets go and hurries inside. A man carrying a lantern and a staff emerges from the other house and walks up the street. When he comes upon Robin, he says, “Home, vagabond, home!” (paragraph 34).

.......Robin takes an immediate dislike to the watchman. But after the man passes, the youth calls out to him: “will you guide me to the house of my kinsman, Major Molineux?” The watchman pays no attention and turns into another street. Robin then hears laughter coming from above. When he looks up, he sees “the sparkle of a saucy eye” (paragraph 38), the narrator says, and the beckoning arm the young lady in the scarlet petticoat. But Robin ignores the temptation and moves on.

.......He wanders here, then there. Most of the houses are dark. On two occasions, he encounters small groups of people in bizarre attire. In both instances, they address him in a strange language. When he fails to respond, they curse him in English and continue on their way.

.......At a church on a street corner, Robin blocks the way of a cloaked man coming toward him and asks where he may find the dwelling of Molineux. The man says he will knock Robin down if he does not step aside. Brandishing his club, Robin repeats his question. Stepping into the moonlight, the man reveals his face—that of the inn patron with the prominent forehead and fiery eyes. He says, “Watch here an hour, and Major Molineux will pass by” (paragraph 44).

.......Robin is astonished to see that one side of the man's face is now deep red and the other side black. “The effect was as if two individual devils, a fiend of fire and a fiend of darkness, had united themselves to form this infernal visage" (paragraph 45), the narrator observes.

.......After the man moves on, Robin sits on the church steps to await Molineux. He notices that the houses on this street are generally far more seemly than those in other neighborhoods. One that stands out is across the street from the church. It is a mansion with an ornate Gothic window and a balcony on pillars.

.......To pass the time, Robin climbs onto a window frame of the church and peers

inside. Moonbeams reveal the emptiness of its pews and shine on an open page of a Bible on the pulpit. The scene fills him with loneliness, so he gets down and again sits on the steps. Gravestones in the churchyard make him wonder whether the major is dead. He then muses for a moment about his family at home—how his clergyman father, his mother, his brother, his sister, and the youngest child passed the day. By and by, he sees a man passing the mansion across the street and calls out to him. The man—a gentleman with a cheerful face—comes over and kindly asks whether he can be of service to the lad. When Robin inquires about Molineux, the man says he has heard of him and asks Robin why he seeks him.

.......Robin replies that the major is his father's cousin. Molineux is a wealthy man,

Robin continues, with military and civilian ranks. He has no children of his own. On a visit to Robin's father, the major expressed a wish to help establish Robin or his older brother in life. Because the older brother is in line to take over the farm that their father operates when not performing his churchly duties, Robin was designated to be the beneficiary of the major's generosity. Robin adds that the choice was a logical one because he possesses certain talents.

.......“I have the name of being a shrewd youth” (paragraph 60), he says.

.......Robin notes that he he traveled for five days to reach the town and seek out

Molineux but that no one has been willing to direct him to the major's residence.

However, he says, the last person he asked for help told him to wait at his present location; the major would eventually pass by. At the gentleman's request, Robin describes the man who told him to wait, noting that “his face was of two different colors.” The gentleman says he knows who the man is and, in fact, encountered him earlier in the evening. The man is trustworthy, he says; the major will indeed be coming along shortly. Saying he is curious to witness Robin's meeting with the major, he sits down on the church steps to wait.

.......A short while later, they hear the shouting of many people, then the sound of

trumpets mingled with laughter. Windows open and heads poke out. As the

merrymaking approaches the church, people pour into the streets. A horseman

appears, followed by a band of musicians, torchbearers, and people in the garments of Indians. The horseman, dressed in a military uniform, carries a sword. The red on one of his cheeks “was an emblem of fire and sword,” the narrator says; “the blackness of the other betokened the mourning that attends them” (paragraph 78). As the horseman passes, he fixes his gaze on Robin, and a moment later the wild procession stops.

.......Right in front of Robin is an uncovered cart bearing an elderly man who had

been tarred and feathered—Major Molineux! His face is pale, his body trembles, and his brow furrows in agony. When he sees and recognizes Robin, he suffers deep humiliation. Yet there is a kind of majesty about the man.

.......“Robin's knees shook, and his hair bristled, with a mixture of pity and

terror” (paragraph 81), the narrator says.

.......All the people Robin met previously in the evening are among the merrymakers. Across the street on the balcony of the mansion is the old man Robin had encountered just after getting off the ferry. He is laughing convulsively as he leans on his cane. In fact, everyone is now laughing convulsively. The wild merriment makes Robin laugh—louder than anyone else. And then the procession moves on in its fiendish frenzy. Through it all, the major maintains that air of majesty.

.......“Well, Robin, are you dreaming?” the gentleman inquires (paragraph 85).

.......Robin replies, “"Thanks to you, and to my other friends, I have at last met my

kinsman, and he will scarce desire to see my face again. I begin to grow weary of a town life, sir. Will you show me the way to the ferry?" (paragraph 89).

.......The man says now is not the time. But in a few days he will show him the way.

.......“Or, if you prefer to remain with us, perhaps, as you are a shrewd youth, you

may rise in the world without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux" (paragraph 90).

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**To Laugh or Not to Laugh**

.......The sight of Major Molineux as a victim of tarring and feathering shocks Robin. Molineux is the man who had pledged to help Robin make his way in the world, a man the youth thought had been held in high esteem. And it is not enough that the townspeople are subjecting him to a painful physical ordeal; with their ridicule and wild laughter, they are also subjecting him to the psychological trauma of utter humiliation. To show the people that he objects to their barbarous punishment of the major, Robin could display a stone face of disapproval. Instead he laughs. Here is the narrator's account of the moment:

......."The contagion [laughter] was spreading among the multitude, when all at once, it seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street,—every man shook his sides, every man emptied his lungs, but Robin's shout was the loudest there" (paragraph 83).

.......This passage seems to indicate that Robin's laughter is spontaneous,

uncontrolled, involuntary. However, a close reading of the story suggests that Robin consciously and deliberately decides to laugh. After all, the narrator has continually emphasized Robin's shrewdness. Robin himself has said, “I have the name of being a shrewd youth" (paragraph 60).

.......Therefore, being shrewd, Robin realizes that failure to laugh at Molineux will

brand him as a sympathizer of the major and render him vulnerable to the wrath of the townspeople. In their frenzied state, they could decide to tar and feather him too. So he laughs. His instinct for survival supersedes any loyalty to, or pity for, Molineux. It also supersedes his desire for Molineux's promised money and

assistance. By laughing, Robin severs ties with the reviled major; by laughing, he

becomes a patriot instead of a British sympathizer. He even (shrewdly) refers to the townspeople as "friends" (paragraph 89) near the end of the story, when he is

speaking with the gentleman next to him.

.......Having thus saved himself from possible harm, Robin is ready to return home, noting that the major "will scarce desire to see my face again" (paragraph 89). But the gentleman—being a shrewd fellow in his own right—correctly points out to Robin that his decision to laugh at the crucial moment was also a personal declaration of independence. It made him a man, a man who is capable of surviving on his own.

"[A]s you are a shrewd youth," the gentleman says, "you may rise in the world

without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux" (paragraph 90).

**Climax**

.......The climax of the story occurs when Robin joins the people in laughing at the

major. His laughter declares his political and personal independence. For additional information on this turning point in Robin's life, see To Laugh or Not to Laugh, above.

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**Themes**

***Coming of Age***

.......As a country boy, Robin arrives in Boston untested in the ways of the world. By the end of the story, however, he has proved himself capable of surviving on his own amid strangers exhibiting peculiar and often unfriendly behavior. Among the good qualities he exhibits are the following:

*Perseverance*: He persists until he achieves his goal—finding Major Molineux.

*Emotional restraint*: Though provoked by antagonists on the street

and at the inn, he wisely refrains from wielding his club.

*Moral restraint*: He walks away from the “saucy eyes” of the pretty girl

who attempts to seduce him.

***Independence***

.......Independence is a double theme in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux.” First, Robin seeks to become an independent young man with the help of Major Molineux. He achieves his independence without the major's help, although it is uncertain at the end of the story whether he will follow through and live in Boston or give up his independence and return to his family. Second, in punishing Molineux—who apparently supports the British overlords who rule colonial America—the townspeople are making known their desire to be free of British oversight.

***Quest for Identity***

.......In seeking independence, Robin, who answers to more than one name

(paragraph 2), is also seeking to establish his own identity. At home, he was the son of a clergyman and farmer. When he arrives in Boston, he is the kinsman of Major Molineux. When he sees Molineux in the cart and laughs along with the crowd, he severs his ties with Molineux and stands alone as a distinct individual. Whether he will accept his individuality or retreat to the security of the farm and his old identity is a question left unanswered at the end of the story.

Hostility and Barbarity

.......Robin arrives in town expecting to find civility. Instead, he meets with rebuffs at every turn and eventually witnesses a barbarous form of punishment: tarring and feathering. Whooping it up, the townsfolk enjoy subjecting their victim, Molineux, to excruciating pain and public humiliation.

***Alienation***

.......The townspeople regard Robin as an unwelcome outsider because of his

connection with Molineux. Consequently, he feels very alone, prompting him to

reflect longingly on his happy life at home with his family.

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**Why Was the Major Punished?**

.......In his introduction to the story, Hawthorne notes that British-appointed

governors of the Massachusetts Bay Colony were highly unpopular with ordinary

citizens. Of six governors in a forty-year period, two were imprisoned, one was

driven out of the colony, one went to an early grave because of continual disputes with members of the House of Representatives, and the other two enjoyed only brief periods of peace. “The inferior members of the court party, in times of high political excitement, led scarcely a more desirable life,” Hawthorne says. Major Molineux is a fictional representative of a British official. Apparently, in his support of the British crown, he had apparently taken action with which the citizens strongly disagreed.

**Will Robin Remain in Boston or Return Home?**

.......Robin wishes to return to his father's farm because he believes his laughter has ruined his opportunity to make a start in society, noting that Major Molineux “will scarce desire to see my face again.” But the gentleman standing next to Robin points out to him that he has exhibited the shrewdness necessary to “rise in the world without the help of your kinsman.” But the story ends before the reader knows whether Robin remains in Boston to capitalize on his opportunity or returns home to work on the farm. Given Robin's perseverance and obvious ambition, it seems likely that he will choose to stay in Boston to realize his full potential. But there is enough ambiguity in his behavior to suggest that he will board the ferry and go back.

**Is Robin's Visit to Boston a Dream?**

.......As if in a nightmare, Robin walks through a maze of shadowy streets, sees a

man with fiery eyes in a tavern, meets people wearing strange attire and speaking a strange language, and on the street again encounters the man with fiery eyes, who now has a face painted red and black. All along the way, he is continually frustrated in an attempt to achieve his goal, a common phenomenon in dreams. When he sees graves around the the church, Robin has a nightmarish thought, which the narrator discloses in the form of questions in paragraph 49: "What if the object of his search, which had been so often and so strangely thwarted, were all the time mouldering in his shroud? What if his kinsman should glide through yonder gate, and nod and smile to him in dimly passing by?"

.......Robin then becomes lonely for his family and pictures his parents and siblings in their country setting. The narrator reports (paragraph 52), " 'Am I here, or there?' cried Robin, starting; for all at once, when his thoughts had become visible and audible in a dream, the long, wide, solitary street shone out before him." The narrator then reports the following:

He [Robin] aroused himself, and endeavored to fix his attention

steadily upon the large edifice which he had surveyed before. But still

his mind kept vibrating between fancy and reality; by turns, the pillars

of the balcony lengthened into the tall, bare stems of pines, dwindled

down to human figures, settled again into their true shape and size,

and then commenced a new succession of changes. For a single

moment, when he deemed himself awake, he could have sworn that a

visage—one which he seemed to remember, yet could not absolutely

name as his kinsman's—was looking towards him from the Gothic

window. A deeper sleep wrestled with and nearly overcame him, but

fled at the sound of footsteps along the opposite pavement.

(paragraph 53)

.......Later, Robin asks the polite gentleman at the street corner, "I shall take it kindly, if you'll answer me a single question. I've been searching, half the night, for oneMajor Molineux; now, sir, is there really such a person in these parts, or am I dreaming?" (paragraph 57). The gentleman confirms for Robin what the man with the painted face told him: that the major will be along soon. Shortly thereafter, the parade appears with "wild figures in the Indian dress, and many fantastic shapes without a model, giving the whole march a visionary air, as if a dream had broken forth from some feverish brain, and were sweeping visibly through the midnight streets" (paragraph 78). After the parade passes, the gentleman asks, "Well, Robin, are you dreaming?" (paragraph 85). Robin does not answer the question but instead asks the gentleman for directions to the ferry—or, if one wishes to interpret his answer another way, for directions out of the dream.

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**Allusions**

Nicotian (Paragraph 11)

.......Allusion to Jean Nicot (1530-1600), who introduced tobacco seeds to Paris in 1550 while serving as French ambassador to Portugal. The word *nicotine* derives from his name.

Philosopher (Paragraph 22)

.......Allusion to Diogenes of Sinope (412-323 BC), a Greek philosopher who

renounced luxury to live a simple life of self-mortification. He ridiculed those who

preached truth but did not live up to their teachings. Tradition holds that he walked through Athens carrying a lantern in daylight and explained that he was searching for an honest man.

Moonshine of Pyramus and Thisbe (Paragraph 33)

.......Allusion to a character in a play enacted in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer*

*Night's Dream*. As part of the entertainment for a wedding feast, bumbling

tradesmen reenact the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, Babylonian lovers whose

parents forbade them from seeing each other. One evening they stole away

separately to meet in secret in fields near the city. Thisbe arrived first. When a lion appeared, Thisbe ran from it but lost the veil she was wearing. The lion did not bother her, but it tore the veil apart. Later, when Pyramus arrived, he saw the

shredded veil and the footprints of the lion. Assuming the lion killed Thisbe, he killed himself. In Shakespeare's play, the tradesmen believethey need to emphasize the fact that Pyramus and Thisbe died on a moonlit night. So, in their goofy reenactment, they make "Moonshine" a character with a speaking part. Moonshine carries a lantern to signify his brightness.

**Symbols**

**polished cane** (paragraph 4): Urban, sophisticated life. It is carried by the old man Robin meets upon entering Boston.

**cudgel** carried by Robin (paragraph 1): 1. Country life. 2. Robin himself, inasmuch as the cudgel was "formed of an oak sapling that retained part of its hardened root."

***Sapling***means a young tree or a youth. "Part of its hardened root" suggests that

Robin carries the root of his farm life with him but left part of it behind.

fire (paragraphs 45, 64, 80): Patriotic fervor. The man with the prominent forehead and bushy eyebrows has fiery eyes. The red paint on his face, the narrator says, is "an emblem of war and fire." Participants in the parade are carrying torches that illuminate the cart bearing Major Molineux, a British sympathizer.

**scarlet petticoat** (paragraphs 26, 28, 32, 33, 81): Sin. Scarlet traditionally represents sin and shame. The young lady wearing the petticoat attempts to seduce Robin.

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**Figures of Speech**

Following are examples of figures of speech in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux":

**Alliteration**

Repetition of a consonant sound

*Paragraph 22*: **p**eople **p**romenading on the **p**avement

*Paragraph 26*: All that Robin could di**sc**ern was a **s**trip of **s**carlet

petticoat, and the occasional **s**parkle of an eye,

*Paragraph 39*: almost ready to believe that a spell **w**as on him, like

that by **w**hich a **w**izard of his **c**ountry had once **k**ept three pursuers

**w**andering, a whole **w**inter night

**Metaphor**

Comparison of unlike things without using *like*, *as*, or *than*

*Paragraph 34*: accents that seemed to fall asleep as soon as they

were uttered. (Comparison of accents to a living things)

**Onomatopoeia**

*Paragraph 38*: At that moment, also, a pleasant **titter** saluted him

from the open window above his head;

*Paragraph 51*: the latch **tinkled** into its place

**Personification**

Comparison of a thing to a human

*Paragraph 49*: Had nature, in that deep hour, become a worshipper in

the house. . . ? (Comparison of nature to a person)

**Paradox**

Contradictory statement that may actually be true

*Paragraph 47*: a beautiful strangeness in familiar objects

**Simile**

Comparison of unlike things using *like*, *as*, or *than*

*Paragraph 78*: The single horseman, clad in a military dress, and

bearing a drawn sword, rode onward as the leader, and, by his fierce

and variegated countenance, appeared like war personified. . . .

(Comparison of the horseman to war)

*Paragraph 83*: He supported himself on his polished cane in a fit of

convulsive merriment, which manifested itself on his solemn old

features like a funny inscription on a tombstone. (Comparison of his

face to a tombstone; comparison of the look on his face to the words

on a tombstone)

**Tarring and Feathering**

.......Tarring and feathering was a form of punishment that originated in the Middle Ages. Typically, those carrying out the punishment painted hot tar on the bare trunk of the victim's body and sometimes on his face, then applied feathers to the tar. Victims suffered physical pain and humiliation while on public display. Afterward, their agony continued when they removed the tar. American colonists resorted to tarring and feathering to express their displeasure with British rule.